

M. W. Shores, *The Comic Storytelling of Western Japan: Satire and Social Mobility in Kamigata Rakugo*

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Matthew W. Shores' *The Comic Storytelling of Western Japan: Satire and Social Mobility in Kamigata Rakugo* is an engaging study of the comic Japanese storytelling art of *rakugo* in Western Japan. What makes this book unique is that the author, a professor of Japanese studies as well as an amateur performer of *rakugo*, focuses on Kamigata *rakugo*, which is a particular form of *rakugo* from Western Japan, commonly referred to as Osaka *rakugo* or Naniwa *rakugo* prior to 1950. English-language literature on *rakugo* generally has been somewhat sparse and, as Shores notes, has tended to focus on the Tokyo tradition. The book consists of five eminently readable chapters and is organized into two sections, consisting firstly of four chapters that provide a detailed account of the history and development of Kamigata *rakugo*, and secondly of the fifth chapter of the book, which contains composite translations of five classic Kamigata stories. As someone researching Japanese popular performing arts, I was very much looking forward to Shores' scholarship in this area, particularly since this is an area that seems to be neglected by Western scholars.

In the first chapter, simply titled "Kamigata, Osaka," Shores provides useful background information on the meaning and origins of the term "Kamigata." In Shores' words, this chapter "will give readers a clearer understanding of what the Kamigata of Kamigata *rakugo* is" (23). Shores notes that "as far as many people were concerned, Osaka was *Kamigata*" (22). Shores also sheds light on various aspects of Kamigata, including the history of the region, Osakan identity, performing arts from the region, and the breakdown in the merchant system. Shores depicts Osaka's rise to prominence as the commercial capital of Japan, driven by the Osaka merchants (*chōnin*). On Osakan identity, Shores reviews some of the commonly espoused characteristics of the people of Osaka, including their reputation for being of good humor. Shores also makes some useful distinctions between the development of Osaka as a horizontal society as compared with the hierarchical society of Tokyo and how this impacted humor in both cities. For example, Shores notes that female characters feature more prominently in Kamigata performing arts, and that the vertical social structure in Edo (the former name of Tokyo) meant that people in Edo had to be careful about "how and when they laughed in public and formal settings" (30). The section on Kamigata performing arts is of particular interest in this chapter, as it provides some fascinating insights into *shamisen*, the puppet art *ningyō jōruri*, and *kabuki*, among other things.

Chapter 2 introduces the history of Kamigata *rakugo* and deals with five historical periods: storytelling prior to 1600, the Early Modern Era, Meiji to World War II, post-World War II Shōwa, and Heisei and Reiwa. This chapter includes information on publications related to storytelling, performers in the early modern period, and the development of *rakugo* as a part of *misemono*, the latter referring to the shows and exhibitions that were popular during the Edo period (1603–1868). In the section on the Early Modern Era, Shores introduces some popular *rakugoka* (performers of *rakugo*) of this period, such as Tsuyu no Gorobē I, Yonezawa Hikohachi I, Yonezawa Hikohachi II, and others. Shores' account of the history of *rakugo* is both thorough and edifying. Of particular interest in this chapter is Shores' discussion of *rakugoka* in more recent times

and how many *rakugoka* are taking to social media. Shores also notes how the number of *rakugoka* posting videos and live-streaming increased significantly during 2020–2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Chapter 3, titled “What Constitutes a *Kamigata Rakugo Story*,” examines the nature of *Kamigata rakugo* in great depth. Shores commences this chapter by describing the difference between the *Kamigata* and *Tokyo* traditions. For example, as Shores tells us, “*Tokyo rakugo* is more centered on storytelling alone” (92). By contrast, in *Kamigata rakugo*, performers will often combine a number of performing arts and will “frequently digress from stories if they think it will please their audience” (ibid.). There are, of course, several other differences that are detailed in the book, such as how the two traditions use music and the complexity of the stories. Shores also covers many other aspects of *Kamigata rakugo*, including performance details and the content of the stories. Shores’ research in this chapter is authoritative, and his insightful commentaries greatly enrich our appreciation of *Kamigata rakugo*.

The remainder of the first section of the book consists of chapter 4: an interview with Hayashi Somemaru IV, a *rakugoka* under whom Shores did an informal apprenticeship. It also includes a short conclusion section in which Shores reiterates many of the main points that he shared throughout the first section of the book. The interview recorded in this was conducted in 2012 and will be especially interesting to *rakugo* enthusiasts.

Chapter 5 features composite translations of five classic *Kamigata* stories. The stories that Shores selected for this section illustrate some of the key elements of *Kamigata rakugo* that he discussed in the first section of the book. For example, the stories include female characters, they are illustrative of the quality of *hade* (meaning lively, flamboyant, or colorful), and they are merchant stories. This section is a must-read for any serious scholar of *rakugo*.

Aside from gaining valuable insights into *Kamigata rakugo*, I discovered, to my interest and delight, that this book has a great wealth of information about *Osaka* and *rakugo* in general, much of which I was previously unaware. An amateur *rakugo* performer himself, Shores has not only paid his dues as a performer, learning the art in *Japan*, but has also succeeded in giving us a rich account of a particularly interesting element of *Japanese* entertainment. *The Comic Storytelling of Western Japan* is recommended not only for *rakugo* researchers and enthusiasts but also for *Japanese* studies researchers with an interest in the history of entertainment in *Japan*.

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